

offered in their communities. As chairman of the Senate Special Committee on Aging, I share these goals. It is important to highlight fitness and nutrition for seniors as a way of life. This is a concept that is very important to our ever-growing aging population.

I salute all athletes participating in the National Senior Games and all those involved in the National Senior Health and Fitness program in their communities.

SUNSHINE IN IRAQI RECONSTRUCTION CONTRACTING AMENDMENT

Mr. WYDEN. Mr. President, with the adoption of my amendment as part of the Defense authorization bill, the Senate is shining much needed sunshine on the process of awarding contracts for the reconstruction of Iraq. This amendment will ensure that Congress and the public will not be kept in the dark about the billions of dollars of contracts for reconstruction of Iraq that have already been awarded or will be awarded under the auspices of the Department of Defense.

This amendment is also critical for ensuring the taxpayers get the best value for their money. An article in yesterday's Wall Street Journal confirms that the Senate has done the right thing. The Journal reports that in "selecting subcontractors to help with hundreds of millions of dollars in repairs and rebuilding, the work is gearing up under a cloud of politics and distrust." The article goes on to say, "Officially, the U.S. government is saying the subcontractor awarding process is going to be fair and open and that nobody will be discriminated against because of politics. But in unofficial conversations, U.S. officials display quite a different attitude."

This latest report raises troubling questions about how U.S. agencies and their contractors are playing favorites when it comes to awarding contracts and subcontracts for Iraq reconstruction.

There are two primary reasons American taxpayers deserve additional details about what has been up until now a closed bid process. First, there is a lot of money on the line—a projected \$100 billion in taxpayer funds for rebuilding. Second, the U.S. General Accounting Office, GAO, has reported that sole-source or limited-source contracts usually aren't the best buy. In my view, the need for explanation increases one hundred-fold if Federal agencies are going to employ a process that may expose taxpayers to additional cost.

Yet sole-source and limited-source contracts seem to be the rule, not the exception, for rebuilding Iraq. On March 24, the Army Corps of Engineers announced a sole-source contract to control Iraqi oil fires. It was later reported that the amount of that contract was up to \$7 billion. The details of that contract have yet to be made public.

The U.S. Agency for International Development, USAID, has also announced that it would limit competition to companies with demonstrated technical ability, proven accounting mechanisms, ability to field a qualified technical team on short notice, and authority to handle classified national security material. But when it came time to actually award these contracts, USAID ignored or circumvented the Agency's own publicly stated criteria for limiting the pool of applicants.

Under the new structure for rebuilding Iraq, these contracts will be overseen by the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance in the Department of Defense. In addition, the Defense Department has awarded and will continue to award its own contracts for Iraq rebuilding.

So more than ever, I believe that if the Federal Government chooses not to use free market competition to get the most reasonable price from the most qualified contractor, then, at a minimum, they should have to tell the American people why. Sunlight is the best disinfectant—and the recent news reports have shown the need for a clearing of the air.

I do understand the argument that these contracts need to be awarded quickly. I do understand that in many cases the companies receiving them have a long history of international work with USAID and other Federal agencies. I simply believe that if the need for speed can adequately justify these closed-bid processes that may expose American taxpayers to additional expenditures, then that justification should be made public. That is why our legislation says that any Federal entity bypassing competitive bidding for Iraqi reconstruction projects has to reveal the justifying documents they have prepared.

As it turns out, when it comes to their contracts USAID even seems to think that sunlight is a pretty good policy. One of the requirements for the \$680 million contract with the main U.S. contractor for Iraq reconstruction Bechtel, requires that it justify to USAID any subcontract awarded without open bids. If USAID can ask that of its main contractor, surely the American people can make the same demand of Federal agencies awarding these contracts.

According to news reports, in 1999, USAID's own inspector general reported that at that time USAID's evaluation program didn't provide sufficient assurance that they were picking the best contractors. Although a follow-up report indicated some improvement, I think that is an argument in and of itself to insist on disclosure of the facts.

Here is my bottom line: There are too many questions and the stakes are too high for Congress not to demand public disclosure of this information. The American people are footing the bill for repairs in Iraq that they often can't get in their own cities and towns

on U.S. soil. The least Federal agencies can do is be a little clearer about who is getting the money and why.

I am pleased to be joined by a distinguished and bipartisan group of colleagues in this effort. I particularly thank the chair of the Government Affairs Committee, Senator COLLINS of Maine. As chair of the committee that oversees contracting legislation, she is an expert in procurement law, a real authority on the very issue addressed by this bill. Her qualities of leadership on the committee and incredible proficiency on this topic give me great confidence that this bill is the right move for our constituents, the right move for the Senate, and the right move for America. I thank her for her support and participation in this effort.

I am also indebted to the other cosponsors of this legislation—Senator CLINTON, Senator BYRD, Senator LIEBERMAN, Senator LAUTENBERG, and Senator HARKIN. In particular, Senator CLINTON has been a strong and steadfast voice on this issue. I appreciate her support and the support of all the cosponsors.

INTRODUCTION OF THE WOMEN'S SMALL BUSINESS PROGRAMS IMPROVEMENT ACT OF 2003

Mr. KERRY. Mr. President, women business owners do not get the recognition they deserve for their contribution to our economy: 18 million Americans would be without jobs today if it weren't for these entrepreneurs who had the courage and the vision to strike out on their own. For 18 years, as a member of the Senate Committee on Small Business and Entrepreneurship, I have worked to increase the opportunities for these enterprising women in a variety of ways, leading to greater earning power, financial independence and asset accumulation. These are more than words. For these women, it means having a bank account, buying a home, sending their children to college, calling the shots.

As the ranking member of the Committee on Small Business and Entrepreneurship, I rise today to say a few words about a bill that my colleague on the committee, our chair, Senator SNOWE, intends to introduce today, the Women's Small Business Programs Improvement Act.

First, however, I commend Senator SNOWE for taking this first step in crafting legislation that addresses many of the problems faced by women entrepreneurs in receiving assistance through the SBA's programs designed to assist them. I applaud Senator SNOWE for working diligently on these issues and for giving women business owners such attention in this SBA Reauthorization process.

Second, I express my sincere and steadfast support for the growing community of women entrepreneurs across the Nation and for the invaluable programs at the SBA that provide women with the tools they need to succeed in

business. As a longtime advocate for women entrepreneurs and SBA's programs, my record in support of the SBA's women's programs and for women business owners speaks for itself. I have continually fought for increased funding of the women's programs at the SBA, for sustaining and expanding the women's business centers, for adequately staffing and improving the National Women's Business Council, and for giving women entrepreneurs their deserved representation within the Federal procurement process, to name a few. With respect to laws assisting women-owned businesses, I have been proud to either introduce the underlying legislation or advocate strongly to ensure their passage and adequate funding.

Today, it is my sincere regret that I cannot sponsor this bill. Senator SNOWE and I both support these programs, agree on many of the changes needed to strengthen these programs, and we have worked together on these issues for many years. However, having only received a copy of the bill this morning, I have not had adequate time to review the proposal and to vet it with the women's business experts that represent the women and the businesses that will be affected by these proposed changes.

One example of a troublesome provision in the proposal is its treatment of existing women's business centers. When our committee was considering my 1999 legislation on this subject, the Women's Business Centers Sustainability Act, I fought to secure a nationwide infrastructure of Women's Business Centers that was in jeopardy because their matching grants from the SBA for the most experienced centers were going to expire. The sustainability legislation allowed 29 Women's Business Centers to continue to operate, serving together with new centers 85,000 women-owned business just in 2000. In this new bill, Senator SNOWE proposes to build on the success of that law by making the existing centers permanent, and I fully support this. If we had written the bill jointly, I would have done exactly the same.

While I praise Senator SNOWE for recognizing the success of centers operating with sustainability grants and the need to make them permanent, I understand her legislation will also establish a process that may create additional and unnecessary administration burdens and costs—thus hindering the centers' ability to deliver critical services to eager entrepreneurs. In some cases, this may cause existing Women's business Centers to close their doors, eliminating access to women business owners in those locales to critical services. This and other key issues need to be carefully addressed, and I look forward to working with Senator SNOWE and other members of our Committee to do so.

I am not alone in my reservations. Just yesterday, both the Association of Women's Business Centers and the Na-

tional Women's Business Council, while still endorsing many of the bill's concepts, expressed concerns about its details and their desire to work together to craft a bill that addresses those concerns and accomplishes our mutual goal for these important women's initiatives.

Once we have had an opportunity to thoroughly examine today's bill, I am confident that all the Democratic members of our Committee stand ready to do just that.

GRANTS TO HIRE FIREFIGHTERS

Mr. DODD. Mr. President, I rise today to thank my colleagues, especially Chairman WARNER and Senator LEVIN, for their support in approving amendment No. 785 that I offered to help America's firefighters and ensure that our Nation will be prepared to respond to future acts of terrorism, should they occur. The amendment, which was approved by the Senate yesterday as part of the Department of Defense Authorization Act, will authorize the creation of a grant initiative to help local governments hire the firefighters they need to address the threat of terrorism and the dangers posed by more ordinary crises.

This amendment, Senate Amendment No. 785, is nearly identical to the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response, SAFER, Act, which I am pleased to have co-authored with the distinguished Senator and chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee—Mr. WARNER. I am happy to say that this amendment has enjoyed strong support on both sides of the aisle.

The amendment I offered will help ensure that America's local fire agencies have the human resources they need to meet the challenge of an extended war against terrorism. The amendment authorizes the President to provide up to \$3 billion in firefighter staffing grants to State and local governments over the next 3 years. These grants will provide a portion of the salary for new firefighters hired by State and local agencies.

Many of us in Congress have long understood that America's firefighters make extraordinary contributions to their communities every day. But on September 11, 2001, we got a glimpse of the larger role that the men and women of the fire service play. The National role of our firefighters has become apparent and our firefighters have made the Nation proud.

After September 11, we know that America needs its firefighters to be better prepared to respond to deliberate acts of mass destruction. The fire service needs to be better prepared to deal with acts of bioterrorism and it needs to be prepared to help save people who have been attacked with toxic chemical weapons. In short, America's fire departments need to be prepared for what once seemed unthinkable.

Despite the increasingly important role firefighters play as part of our Na-

tional homeland defense system, communities over the years have not been able to maintain the level of staffing necessary to ensure the safety of the public of our firefighters themselves. Since 1970, the number of firefighters as a percentage of the U.S. workforce has steadily declined and the budget crises that our State and local governments are now enduring have only made matters worse. Across the country today, firefighter staffing is being cut and fire stations are even being closed because of State and local budget shortfalls.

That is not to say that we haven't made progress—we have. In recent years, the Federal Government has recognized that it can and should be a better partner with local firefighters. In 2000, my colleagues Senator DEWINE, Senator LEVIN, Senator WARNER, and I worked successfully on this floor to help create the FIRE Act. The FIRE Act was the first Federal grant program explicitly designed to help fire departments throughout America obtain better equipment, improved training, and much needed personnel. Since September 11, 2001, Congress and the administration have provided billions of dollars to help local firefighters purchase equipment and training to respond to acts of terrorism, accidental fires, chemical spills, and natural disasters. Over the last 2 years, the Federal FIRE Act grant initiative has provided nearly \$½ billion in direct assistance to local fire departments across the country and will provide another \$750 million this year. We are beginning to significantly improve the quality of the equipment available to firefighters in every State and in communities large and small.

Today, with passage of the SAFER provision, we have taken a giant step forward toward improving staffing conditions for America's fire service. The need for this legislation is abundantly clear. Currently two-thirds of all fire departments operate with inadequate staffing. Experts believe that previous hiring limitations and the increased demands for first responder services have resulted in a shortage of 85,000 firefighters.

According to a "Needs Assessment Study" recently released by the U.S. Fire Administration, USFA, and the National Fire Protection Association, NFPA, understaffing contributes to enormous problems. For example, USFA and NFPA have found that only 11 percent of our Nation's fire departments have the personnel and equipment they need to respond to a building collapse involving 50 or more occupants. I am delighted that the Senate has taken steps to address these problems and, again, I thank my colleagues for joining me in this important effort.

In closing, let me say that this legislation honors America's firefighters. It acknowledges the men and women who charge up the stairs while everybody else is running down. But it does more